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Being T/here

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Preface: *Being T/here*

Roberta Mock

In 2015, I was invited to attend the Nordic Summer University (NSU) in Druskininkai, a spa town in Lithuania, as one of its keynote speakers. It was here, over the course of a week, that I participated in workshops and discussions – warm, generous, creative, thought-provoking and rigorous – led by many of the contributors to this book. I travelled with my British daughter and granddaughter, who is named after Maya Deren. Deren was an avant-garde film-maker whose family immigrated to America when she was a child in the face of anti-Semitic Soviet pogroms. This is how I started my first keynote presentation:

Sometimes it seems that everything happens for a reason. Sometimes it seems that you open your mouth and your mother's voice comes out. That's probably for a reason too. My mother often tells me that everything happens for a reason. And here I am with you – together – in Lithuania. I've never been to Lithuania before. But here I am. With you. And not only that but I've come here with my daughter, Siobhan, and her daughter, Maya. This is actually the first place we've been together outside of Devon in Southwest England.

Here's the thing... my great-grandmother, Susan Sugarman, was born in Lithuania – in 1889, in Vilna, which is what the Jewish population called Vilnius at that time. She immigrated to Canada when she was a child, which is eventually where I was born and brought up. Here we are together, when I was about Maya's age. As you can see, poor Nanny Sue was in danger of being crushed by my rather robust infant self.



Fig 1: Crushing Nanny Sue (Windsor, 1966)

Now, it seems that my mother never really accepted that I only wanted one child. She has made this abundantly clear at regular intervals since Siobhan was about Maya's age. The last time was when Siobhan was a few months' pregnant: "You could have another baby, too," she said. "It isn't too late." So I pointed out, as if she didn't know, that I was about to become a grandmother and that I was then 48 years old. And she said, "Well, your great grandmother, Nanny Sue, was 48 when she had Uncle Steve."

But not only that... at about that time, when Siobhan was a few months' pregnant, my periods stopped. Or stalled. Let's just say they're still stuttering to a halt, a kind of corporeal intergenerational conversation. A period – or a full stop as the British say – placed firmly at the end of my mother's extended campaign for more grandchildren. And also an ellipsis – dot, dot, dot – a dripping trail leading to my future as a grandmother.

Oh. Was that too personal? Did I overshare? I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

Okay, I probably did. Just a little bit. To make a point. I'm really not very good at lying – or acting. These verbs, of course, are not synonymous – I'm just saying.

The thing is, I have increasingly come to recognise my practices as a researcher, my own body of work, as intimately imbricated with the lived experience of my material body. It seems obvious when I say it outloud. As the dance philosopher, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has written, "the body I am and the body I have – lived and physical bodies" – together define my "livability in the world" (2015, p. 26). And going further, this livability shapes what and how I communicate with the world, whether through writing, spoken word or creative practice.

Many of the writers in this collection discuss how their methods of communication, striving for intersubjective encounter, are shaped by their livability in the world. Alexandra Litaker hopes to discover "how it is that my story connects to the body before you and to you". Elina Saloranta and Myna Trustram work through loss and melancholy in a correspondence that revolves around their daily experience, sharing their struggle to express to us both their depths of feeling and relationship with each other. Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt's act of walking in suriashi, as a woman in public space, quotes and honours the practice of her teacher, Nishikawa Senrei, while creating a new body memory. As Diana Taylor has noted, "bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems" and the nature of their participation is impacted by gender and ethnicity (2003, p. 86).

Down/town: bodies/borders

On the evening of my 45th birthday, I presented an artistic research performance-lecture called *Down/town*. It was originally conceived as an attempt to aesthetically unravel – through a very basic form of autoethnographic cultural geography – my relationship with cities and how this has

shaped my understanding of performance – that is, the production of communicative events within the bounded specificities of time and space. Its pivotal section took place on a stage decorated like a suburban American living room. Audience members were encouraged to sit, stand or mill about on it, although they could also watch from the raked seating, facing the stage end-on. There were close-circuit cameras situated on stage (operated by “my children”), which meant that those in the auditorium had a close view of what happened there. About two-thirds of the audience chose to hide in the dark in this way rather than interact with me on stage. Those who did were welcomed to my birthday party.



Fig. 2: *Down/town* (Plymouth, 2011). Photo by Benjamin Graham

On stage, it is 1985 and we are in Southfield, Michigan, which is a suburb of Detroit. *I am Bobby* and I am your hostess, the birthday girl. I’m working the room this evening. I am something of a local celebrity – fourteen years ago, I made a local television commercial for a shopping centre and it is still shown every year at Christmas. *I am Bobby*, who despite being Jewish, once was and always will be the Tel-Twelve Mall Elf. Just for fun, I’m wearing my elf costume tonight. Actually, I got too big

for the original elf costume so I'm wearing a new one I made myself. Called upon to give my birthday speech, I sing a bit, I reminisce. I try not to be too bitter.

I seem to have a lot in common with Bobby the Tel Twelve Mall Elf. Because she was conceived to express critical ideas through my body, her voice always quotes and doubles my own (even, or especially, when I do not like her). In 1985, we each lived just a few miles beyond downtown Detroit: me to the southeast in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, which is where I was born and brought up; Bobby, somewhat confusingly, to the northwest, in Southfield in the United States. As Jerry Herron has noted, the city of Detroit has infamously been synonymous with the spectacle of urban disintegration: a "borderama," an island adrift from the American imperative of opportunity (Herron, 2010, p. 66). The Detroit River (separating Detroit from Windsor and the United States from Canada) and 8 Mile Road (separating Detroit from Southfield, technically a city in its own right) are physical boundaries that also separate Detroit from the rest of North America.

Despite having emigrated the year *Down/town* was set, I continue to identify simultaneously with these two cities which are paradoxically cleaved together by an international border: in my imaginary, Detroit(down)/Windsor(town). My relationships with them can best be characterised by their liminality and multiplicity. I always seemed to be on the other side of something else and, now, I reflect on my status as borderlander by birth from the perspective of my status as migrant by choice.

As Elizabeth Grosz, among many others, has noted, bodies and cities are mutually constituting. Our relationships with particular cities determine our corporeal orientations, how we live in space, how others see us. As "the site for the body's cultural saturation", the city is "the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed. In turn," Grosz writes, "the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic, economic and psychological) needs, extending the limits of the city, of the sub-urban" (1998, p. 35). My coming of age in Windsor/Detroit produced a fascination with these limits and how they are exceeded through the sub- and super-urban.

As a result, *Down/Town* explored what might constitute a city beyond geographical boundaries; how cities not only create specific performances, but are created through performances; and that the performances of cities take many forms: concerts, sports events, political rallies, riots, firework displays. What crystallized for me through the making of this performance is the realization that

those who most readily identify with being “from Detroit” are those who hold a significant attachment to its cultural products. If you received local Detroit television and radio stations, if you could drive home and back to attend a Tigers game or Ice Capades at Olympia Stadium or the Thanksgiving Day parade down Woodward, if you could see bands at Joe Louis Arena or Pine Knob or the Silverdome or St Andrews Hall, then you are more likely to say you are from Detroit, or perhaps “from the Detroit area”, even if you lived in another country as I did.

I created Bobby the Tel Twelve Mall Elf to embody, discuss and demonstrate that performers are shaped by specific cities and shape these cities; that the performance writing of cities includes songs, placards, film scripts, T-shirt slogans, and television jingles for local businesses; that many cities are similar and their fortunes are linked but that each city is unique; and finally, that cities are autobiographical sites of performance as well as the sites in which memories perform themselves. Bobby was not intended as a character but as a conduit. She was meant to reflexively represent cultural memory, localised through individual and collective processes of mapping.

Diana Taylor has observed that cultural memory is an embodied practice, “an act of imagination and interconnection” (2003, p. 82). I hoped that Bobby would be able to *do* cultural memory *as* cultural memory, with all its complexities. For me, the Tel Twelve Mall Elf (a “real” character played by a woman I once met as a teenager), located in and through my body somewhere between fact and fiction, was as ephemeral as Detroit’s industrial supremacy, as the bricks and mortar of the Tel Twelve Mall (which no longer exists), as the act of performance, and as the nature of memory work. The text I wrote for her was a stringing together of television jingles, catchphrases, songs, poems and local memory texts. Bobby was some twenty years older than me in 1985 – although I was older than her when I performed her. In creating her as an alter-ego, I embraced my personal history and my memories; these are not Bobby’s memories, although she is borne of them. By the time she was staged, I had come to realize that Bobby is the me I was afraid I would become in 1985, the year I left North America.

Writing today, I am struck by the extent to which this practice-research project aligns with the concerns articulated by the editors of this book: that is, understanding what it means to be local, both as part of a collective and as an individual; exploring place as inbetweenness; and encountering and producing space in a re-imagined form. I am also acutely aware, in this specific historical moment, of my privilege in growing up able to cross borders confidently and with ease. Local newspapers have recently reported that Windsor school boards have cancelled fieldtrips to

the Detroit Opera House and Holocaust Memorial Center, due to fears that some children with potential connections to Muslim countries will be detained or turned away at the American border (Reindl, 2017). As Catharine R. Stimpson has lamented, “I grew up in a United States that romanticized ‘home’ and now longs for a walled-in ‘homeland’” (2016).

In the thick of things

During our stay in Druskininkai for the Nordic Summer University, Siobhan and Maya and I visited the local pump room with Karen Bentley Pollick. Together we sampled the resort’s famous natural mineral waters: the elemental flow that largely explains the movement of bodies to and in this place. Karen is an American violinist and violist who lives in Lithuania and performed at the NSU symposium. When we met a few days later in Vilnius, Karen gifted a copy of *Price of Concord* by Markas Petuchauskas, which she had asked the author to inscribe to me.

It’s an extraordinary book with three different subtitles – “Memoirs”, “Portraits of Artists” and “Interactions of Cultures” – and one that exemplifies Dwight Conquergood’s identification of knowledges grounded in personal connection and experience. Conquergood positions these insights in contrast to “universal” claims that pretend “to transcend location”:

The dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing about’. This is a view from above the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print. This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing who’. This is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral. (2002, p. 146)

In articulating his situated knowledge, Petuchauskas’s text resembles many of the projects discussed in this collection. For instance, Larissa Lily reminds us how the pull of gravity grounds us, regardless of location, how it offers a sense of belonging through the weight of our bodies. Eduardo Abrantes is immersed in the energy of an Estonian choir discovering their collective sonic potential. Cecilia Lagerström explains how the psychophysical experience of walking in Gothenburg evokes memories, associations and sensorial impressions. Luisa Greenfield, engaged to photograph an exhibition at the site of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, is so physically overcome that she is forced to abruptly flee; in the process, she seems forced to disassociate in an act of self preservation, her writing moving from first to third person.

Petuchauskas's writing from "the thick of things", like many of the essays in this book, traverses time and space suddenly, emotionally and rhizomatically. However, it differs in significant aspects as well: chaotic and messy, *Price of Concord* is not easy to follow. Of course, Petuchauskas is not engaged in what we currently understand to be "artistic research" nor obliged to follow the conventions that have been developed to enable practitioner-scholarship to be embraced (to a greater or lesser extent internationally) by the academy. What remains shared by Petuchauskas and the contributors to this volume is "an epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement [that] is mutually replenishing, and pedagogically powerful" (Conquergood, 2002, p. 153).

Petuchauskas was born in Šiauliai in 1931 and, at the age of nine, moved to Vilnius – then, as in my great grandmother's time, predominantly a Polish and Jewish city – with his parents. Within a year, his father was arrested and shot by the occupying Nazis. Petuchauskas and his mother were confined to the Vilnius Ghetto, escaping shortly before its liquidation in 1943 and going into hiding, moving between safe spaces in forests and on farms. They were among the 5% of Vilnius's Jewish population to survive the war.

Unable to pursue a law career because of his Jewishness, Petuchauskas eventually became the first Lithuanian recipient of a PhD in theatre research (from the State Institute for Theatre Arts in Moscow) and the first art researcher in the Academy of Sciences of Lithuania, where he created a national art research centre (Petuchauskas, 2015, p. 95). In 1991, shortly after Lithuania achieved independence from the Soviet Union, Petuchauskas found himself unemployed and began promoting a dialogue between Lithuanian and Litvak (broadly, Lithuanian Jewish) cultures by curating cultural events and writing documentary films. The environment he evokes in *Price of Concord* resembles that of China Miéville's novel *The City and the City* (2009), in which two different cities occupy the same geographical space, its inhabitants legally required to "unsee" the other.

Petuchauskas's particular passion is sharing the history of the Vilnius Ghetto Theatre, the productions of which he remembers with remarkable clarity from his childhood. In *Price of Concord*, he describes a televised interview he watched as part of his research process, between the Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol and Yisroel Segal, who had been a leading director in the theatre. The interview took place in 1984, the year that Sobol's play, *Ghetto*, premiered in Haifa and Berlin, opening with a recollection of the final performance at the Ghetto Theatre in 1943. This was one of

the few performances that Petuchauskas was unable to attend, as it was staged when he and his mother were preparing their escape (2015, p. 250). When Sobol asked about the theatre's repertoire, Segal responded that plays were dependent on two contingencies: the availability of scripts in the ghetto library and "our possibilities". Pressed on the latter, Segal explained that scripts were chosen "depending on which of the actors stayed alive" (Petuchauskas, 2015, p. 247).

When the establishment of the theatre was first proposed, Segal opposed it on the grounds that it marked the "forced normalization of ghetto life" and that it would be difficult to convince actors that theatre could be "performed in a cemetery" (qtd. in Beinfeld, 1997). Nevertheless, for Petuchauskas, thinking back to his experience as a boy, the Ghetto Theatre offered "humanity, humanism and hope; it inspired the movement spiritually. Physical resistance could not have existed without spiritual resistance, and vice versa" (2015, p. 246). He is describing, in an extreme form, what Jill Dolan calls an "utopian performative." By offering fleeting glimpses of the "potential of elsewhere," these performances can produce "intersubjectively intense" moments (Dolan, 2005, p. 5) that are often able to "create the *condition* for action." In evoking "a crystalline moment of past-present-future 'now,' time," utopian performatives express "a structure of feeling prior to its enunciation" (Dolan, 2005, pp. 168-169; emphasis in original).

Translocal Embodied Accounts

There is, obviously, a massive difference between cultural products primarily informed by "being (alive)" and those created through "being t/here," although many of the essays in this book do indeed deal with the ongoing personal and cultural trauma of loss, disappearance and genocide. Without wishing to imply a false equivalency of political contexts and lived experience, I think that almost all the artistic research projects discussed in this collection can be considered examples of utopian performatives. Sebastian Dieterich's and Wiktoria Furrer's concept of micropracticing is intended to act as the starting point for social change and as a tool for political struggle. Sian Rees discusses how Fun Palaces are able to gesture toward a better world through play and social collaboration. Per Roar develops an ethnographic choreographic process to create the conditions for a "transformative recognition" that helps to process grief. In discussing her artwork in which bundles of possessions simultaneously signify abundance, impermanence and dispossession, Maggie Jackson evokes Albert Camus's "invitation to live and to create" in a world devoid of memory and deprived of hope.

In the introduction, the editors of this collection suggest that the nomadic life of the arts researcher offers opportunities to create relational knowledges through translocal exchange. Similarly, Catharine R. Stimpson's concept of Nomadic Humanities stresses "verbs rather than nouns" (2016). For her, studies in the Nomadic Humanities are those that "take up the processes and meanings of all our intricate, terrifying, interconnected, and beautiful movements" as they are represented and made manifest in the arts, history, anthropology and sciences, as well as "the moral gyroscopes people devise to guide them through it all". One of Stimpson's case studies is Rosi Braidotti, whose family immigrated to Australia from Italy when she was a child and whose subsequent academic, peripatetic way of life shaped her philosophical grounding and advocacy.

For Braidotti (writing about the redefinition of a European social imaginary), a strategy of locatedness, one that "parallels the becoming nomadic of subjectivity", is able to embrace those who have been historically excluded from democratic process: women, ethnic or racialized others, homosexuals, non-human animals. To perform a politics of location is to create materially embedded, "embodied accounts" that "illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world" (Braidotti, 2004, p. 133). *Being There* offers a richness of such locally embedded accounts: products of lived and material bodies, in flux, transmitting knowledge from ground level, and utopian in spirit.

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